

**1** In many accounts, the modernist animation styles that define the postwar American cartoon, and of which United Productions of America stands as the primary practitioner, are folded into the larger penetration of modernism into the public consciousness after World War II. Extending across various fields of cultural and material production, currents in art, architecture, furniture design, and product design converged to render each development a manifestation of a general approach to a new postwar modernity, an overarching aesthetic we now look back on as mid-century modernism, a bold, visually striking design ethos suited to life in the atomic age. While animation indeed fits into this widespread shift in popular taste, to subsume the innovations of UPA and its offshoot studios under an all-encompassing designation of mid-century modernism tends to obscure as much as it illuminates, often implying, in a manner mildly condescending to a "lesser" branch of film practice, that the postwar shift in animation style was merely a low-culture appropriation of more significant revolutions in more legitimate fields.

While postwar animation's stylistic similarities to its cultural surroundings are central to an understanding of its appeal and its importance, its roots are equally vital to a full account of the work cartoons were doing in the period. Tonight I would like to focus on animation's relationship to Precisionism, an often overlooked strand of American modernist painting that first appeared in the late teens, proliferated in the 1920s and continued, albeit at a declining rate, throughout the 30s and early 40s, turning to greater abstract experimentation after the war and finally falling off the radar as Abstract Expressionism took shape. I aim to locate modern animation within a set of artistic sources that were concerned with developing a distinctly homegrown modernism, and moreover, one that operated outside the orbit of Abstract Expressionism, the movement that has since come to occupy pride of place in accounts of American modernist art. In so doing, I would like to propose a more complex account of the development of modern animation by highlighting this earlier current in modernist painting infrequently discussed in histories of modernity and modernism.

At stake is a fuller understanding of how, and when, a pervasive American modernism came to be. UPA is almost invariably discussed as an explosion on the animation scene, a revolution in cartoon aesthetics that wowed highbrow critics and confused lowbrow audiences with its innovative, entirely new approach. While the bold, stylized forms of mid-century animation may have been new to the previously Disneyfied terrain of cartoon naturalism, they were not new to America, thanks to the Precisionist paintings that flourished between the two world wars.

It is my contention that the animators of UPA and the studios they inspired were not tapping into a brand-new modernism that burst onto the scene in 1945 with Abstract Expressionism and the repurposing of wartime technology, with Pollock and plastics; rather, they were picking up a torch lit by the Precisionists during the peak of the mechanical age and kept smoldering during the Depression years by a few tenacious—or stubborn—painters, reigniting it in a new era with, underneath all the talk of progress, strikingly similar concerns: vision, order, and modernity.

In establishing this particular strand of a multifarious mid-century modernism, I begin with the Precisionists, defining their vision of American modernity and the work their form of modernism does to assimilate it. Outlining their response to the question of visual order in a disordered modern world, I then explore the ways in which this approach resonates with the concerns of the animators who founded UPA as a response to the supposedly outmoded naturalism of contemporary cartoons. In conclusion, I discuss the similarities and differences of form between Precisionism and UPA animation, pointing to the continuities across their two modernist moments, and to the ruptures between them that give UPA's resurgent modernism its unique character.

Precisionism occupies a liminal space in the history of American modernist art, squeezed between the European Cubism that brought modernist painting to America's attention in the teens and the Abstract Expressionism that would come to define American abstract art after WWII.

The interim between these two periods was marked by a search for a uniquely American art, one that could be modernist without being European, and that could address changes in the experience of time and space without merely copying Cubism or resorting to an outmoded, pastoral brand of realism. The proponents of this realism, commonly known as the American Scene painters, fought bitterly with proponents of abstract art for the right to claim the mantle of Americanness, a politically inflected battle that simmered throughout the 1920s and came to a boil during the New Deal era as federal funding for artistic projects gave particular relevance to the question of whose art should represent the national character.

One of the most significant abstract movements of this period, Precisionism was particularly outspoken in its efforts to redefine the subject matter of American art in the twentieth century. Painters including Morton Schamberg, Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler, Ralston Crawford, Niles Spencer, George Ault, and Louis Lozowick began to adapt European modernism to the American landscape, seeking a way to make it relevant to the peculiarities of their own geography, history, and culture. Throughout the 1920s, as industrialization and urbanization were reaching the peak of their influence, these artists turned their attention to industrial and architectural imagery, and found receptive audiences for their work in influential New York galleries. By the end of the decade, Precisionism was a vital, if as yet unnamed, presence on the American art scene.

That Precisionism sought the expression of a core American identity must be balanced by the recognition that there was no "Precisionist School" to speak of, but rather a loosely defined group of artists whose membership varies with the commentator discussing them. Even the term "Precisionist" wasn't universally accepted, vying with designations such as "Immaculate," "Mechanist," and "Cubist-Realist." Yet if Precisionism was not a unified school of painting, the loose coalition of artists nevertheless shared a more or less central set of formal and aesthetic concerns. **2** Martin Friedman, perhaps the seminal chronicler of the Precisionists, characterizes their aesthetic as "extreme simplification of form, unwavering, sharp delineation, and carefully reasoned abstract organization." **3** Art historian Gail Stavitsky is more specific: "The essence of the Precisionist aesthetic was an objectivist synthesis of abstraction and realism, manifested by hard-edged, static, smoothly-brushed, simplified forms rendered in unmodulated colors." The Precisionist mode of representation rested on a reduction of the modern American landscape to flat planes of solid color, partaking in the materials of abstraction while still remaining yoked to representation.

As their sometime designation as "Cubist-Realists" attests, the Precisionists owed much of their style to the Cubists painting in the early decades of the twentieth century. The tendency to break up pictorial space into planes and to reduce objects to precise geometric forms echo the practices of Cubism; however, in adapting it to the American landscape, the Precisionists did not entirely stick to the Cubist script, rather making use of its innovations to lay a foundation for further experimentation. In their catholic and idiosyncratic approach to modernist precedent, they drew on other sources of European art as well. In fact, it is arguable that they developed their style by rummaging through the storehouse of modernist techniques, taking what they liked and jettisoning the rest— **4** from Cubism, the grafting of multiple perspectives onto the picture plane (but not its extreme distortion of the object); **5** from Dada, the focus on industrially produced objects (but not its wry, confrontational sense of humor); **6** from Surrealism, the assemblage of everyday things (but not its penchant for the fantastic); **7** from Fauvism, the nondescriptive use of color (but not its forceful, visible brushwork); **8** from Constructivism, the use of solid colors and simple lines and shapes (but not its pure abstraction and political commitments); **9** from Futurism, the engagement with the machine (but not its celebration of speed).

Yet the Precisionists infused these elements of European modernism with distinctly

American characteristics, foremost among them the representation of American industry, machinery, urbanism, and architecture. In a manifesto printed in the catalog for the 1927 Machine-Age Exposition in New York, Louis Lozowick, one of the central painters of the Precisionist period, claims, **10** "The skyscrapers of New York, the grain elevators of Minneapolis, the steel mills of Pittsburgh, the oil wells of Oklahoma, the copper mines of Butte, the lumber yards of Seattle give the American industrial epoch its diapason." These forms, already geometrical, were not only the perfect subject matter for an abstract-representational style of painting; they were its very justification. The precision with which the Precisionists executed their art was merely a symptom of their era; or, in Friedman's words, **11** "Today the localized boundaries of the gallery loyalties seem less urgent and it is clear now that we are dealing with a much broader, pervasive idea whose inspiration was in the air of that time." This pervasive idea underlying the form and content of Precisionist art is order, a concept that was indeed in the air of that time, apparent in the flowering of mass-scale industry, the scientific efficiency experiments of Frederick Winslow Taylor and Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, and in the calls for stability in the wake of the transcontinental upheaval of World War I. Elegantly synthesizing the zeitgeist and the visual forms it engendered, Lozowick argues, **12** "The dominant trend in America of today, beneath all the apparent chaos and confusion, is towards order and organization which find their outward sign and symbol in the rigid geometry of the American city: in the verticals of its smoke stacks, in the parallels of its car tracks, the squares of its streets, the cubes of its factories, the arc of its bridges, the cylinders of its gas tanks."

In their attempt to reflect and refine this order and organization, Precisionists undertook a rationalization of the American scene, using abstraction as a method of simplification of perceptual overload. Stavitsky observes, **13** "Precisionism proposed a fundamental reordering of experience, a clarifying search for architectonic structure underlying the chaos of reality," seeking what Friedman calls "an idealized state of absolute order." In using static, geometrical forms as their tools for representation, these artists identified the traces of an inherent order in the world and amplified it.

As chroniclers of an emerging machine culture, the Precisionists are often simplistically portrayed as champions or cheerleaders of industrial modernity, as if the choice to depict the modern world qualifies as an endorsement; Friedman refers to their "reverence for modern technology" as a defining feature, and the phrase "technological optimism" echoes across the literature. However, the scholarship on Precisionism occasionally hints at, usually only to disavow, an element of discomfort in Precisionist views of the city, from the **14** "hauntingly immobile" cast of Stefan Hirsch's *New York, Lower Manhattan* to the paranoid, oppressive "melancholy" of George Ault's *Sullivan Street, Abstraction*. Challenging the general tendency of Precisionist historiography, Sharon Corwin identifies **16** "elisions and, perhaps more important, tensions and ambivalence" in the Precisionist attitude toward modernity that suggest a sustained critique across artists' bodies of work. Even the seminal Precisionist Charles Sheeler's work, Mark Rawlinson argues, offers a veiled critique of urban-industrial modernity in its **17** "imprecise precisionism," a faint but definite skewing of perspective and regularity that "highlights im-precisely the irrationality...that hides behind the facade of rationality." This discomfort, the seat of Precisionism's critical edge in the face of accelerating modernity, highlights what Corwin calls **18** "the true strangeness and uncertainty of the Precisionist visual project," the acknowledgement that Precisionism is not a safe imposition of order so much as a hopeful search *for* it. The tensions and imprecisions in Precisionist painting offer a useful lens through which to examine UPA's mid-century output, and the "true strangeness" of Precisionism links this supposedly stoic artistic practice with the decidedly less stoic arena of the post-WWII cartoon.

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UPA's contribution to the development of the postwar American cartoon is both massive and well-documented. By the early 1950s, the work of its animators was, as animation historian Michael Barrier notes, **20** "the reference point, the studio with which every other studio automatically compared its cartoons, whether or not a given studio was trying to emulate the UPA films." Yet, as Amid Amidi argues, there was no "UPA style" to speak of, at least not specifically; rather, UPA's aesthetic gathered around a basic set of visual stylistic options: **21** in this case, hard-edged, simplified forms; bold, unmodulated colors; an evacuation of detail; a

minimalist environmental surround often reduced to bare-bones geometry, regular patterns, or even a single flat color plane; the abolition of rounded, centerline character design; and a relaxed—to put it mildly—implementation of Renaissance perspective.

In embracing the multiplicity and the stylistic boundaries within which it operated, UPA staked its reputation not merely on its flatness, or its boldness, or its minimalism, but on the condition within which these traits were contained: UPA became famous for its modernism.

When Zack Schwartz and John Hubley fired their first shot across the bow of the American animation industry with their 1946 article "Animation Learns a New Language," they explicitly positioned themselves against the bulk of American cartooning practice with their argument for a more mature, human-centered cartoon freed from its vaudeville roots and its animal-based slapstick. Much attention has been paid to the article's call for a shift away from "pigs and bunnies," a move constructed as central to postwar animation's greater focus on character psychology and everyday modern life; and rightly so. However, equally important is Schwartz and Hubley's insistence on a new visual language divorced from Disney Studio's obsession with photographic pictorial space; even before the famous 1941 strike, tensions between animators and Walt Disney grew from the former's desire to experiment with forms influenced by modern art and the latter's refusal to sacrifice the illusion of life.

As Paul Wells has thoroughly argued in *Animation and America*, postwar modernist animation is a rebellion against a conservative naturalism, **22** "effectively a history of responses to Disney's usurpation of the form in the period between 1933 and 1941." This inter-generational unrest maps suggestively onto the conflict in the art world over naturalist American Scene painting versus abstract painting, implicating the American cartoon in the art world's fight for modernism, but in a mirroring battle that erupted almost two decades later. At midcentury, in the wake of World War II, just as in the 1920s after World War I, the artistic response to disorder and massive social and technological change is a reimposition of sensory order through an abstracted form of representation aimed at reducing the visual field to its most basic constituent elements of line, shape, and color. Where in the 1920s American painters turned to European art forms for a precedent in its engagement with encroaching modernity, by mid-century the nation—thanks to Round One of modernist painting—had its own form of homegrown modernism to build upon. UPA's innovation, then, was less the invention from whole cloth of a new cartoon style based in contemporary sources than an adaptation of American art's first tussle with modernity to the demands of a new era.

Though UPA never acknowledged the Precisionists, **23** its look is often strikingly similar, begging the question of what might explain the resurgence of Precisionist visual strategies at mid-century, and to what extent UPA's formal innovations represent a significant engagement with modernity rather than a fashionable appropriation of a contemporary, and increasingly popular, modernism in the "higher" arts. I aim to highlight the strain of serious research into methods of visual communication underlying UPAs commercial success in the entertainment market, illustrating the centrality of its early wartime education and training films to the later developments in its theatrical cartoons, thus providing a new lens through which to read its crowd-pleasing shorts as participants in the struggle to attune the human sensorium to the changing American landscape after World War II.

A key player in this story is Gyorgy Kepes, a Hungarian émigré at the heart of the burgeoning field of American design education in the 1940s and 50s. In his seminal 1943 design primer *Language of Vision*—a design primer that by the late 1940s had become an introductory textbook in rapidly proliferating design programs around the country, and one, moreover, that UPA animators have cited as an important influence on their work—he argues that the visual surround in postwar America presented larger perceptual challenges than the eye could master: skyscrapers, airplanes, subways, elevated trains, automobiles, and urban concentration conspired to produce an increasingly occupied visual field, a multiplication of layers of depth with which human perception had to catch up. It is art's job, he contends, to aid in the relief effort. In seeking an artistic solution to this modern problem, Kepes finds fault with naturalism, for failing to respond to a changing environment, as well as with pure abstraction, for retreating too far from a productive engagement with the visible world.

It must be noted that these changes in the urban environment are all hallmarks of late

nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernity—indeed, they are one of the pillars of the historiographical concept of modernity. Yet despite early twentieth-century modernism's efforts to adapt to new stimulus and sensation, humankind is still attempting to respond to continuing, escalating change at mid-century, and in very similar ways. Even the turn-of-the-century rhetoric of attention, distraction, and retention elaborated in the work of Jonathan Crary returns in the 1940s, here in reference to wartime training films and the suitability of the cartoon for mass education.

Schwartz and Hubley's "Animation Learns a New Language"—an article that nods to Kepes in calling for "a new visual language"—builds a case for animation as a medium of education and communication rather than of puerile amusement. The engine of this new conception of animation, World War II, introduced new possibilities for visual communication through the necessity of training films aimed at large groups of unskilled recruits responsible for learning large amounts of information in small amounts of time. In demanding a new, more efficient form of mass communication, the United States Military's First Motion Pictures Unit brought two incomplete modes of address, the workmanlike educational film and the zany theatrical cartoon, into conversation with each other—or, as Schwartz and Hubley put it, **24** "Because of wartime necessity, pigs and bunnies have collided with nuts and bolts." Outlining the development of the modern animated training film, the animators, writing in 1946, call for the redirection of a former wartime necessity into wider public culture, and for the repurposing of the efficient cartoon short not for military training but for public education and communication.

For Schwartz and Hubley, animation is an ideal medium for mass communication not because it is entertaining, but because of its unique symbolic properties: **25** "Within the medium of film, animation provided the *only* means of portraying many complex aspects of a complex society. Through animated drawings artists were able to visualize areas of life and thought which photography was incapable of showing." (((explain image))) In other words, animation, untethered to photographic representation, could perform a kind of conceptual abstraction that live-action film could not. And if animation's independence from external reality enhanced its ability to convey ideas, its capacity for movement also differentiated it from the other contemporary form of training document used to visualize knowledge, the drawing or diagram. It could show invisible processes in action—a new language of vision indeed. If Schwartz and Hubley got their way, animation could render the inner reality of things more accurately than any previous imaging technology.

In the third and final section of *Language of Vision*, entitled "Toward a Dynamic Iconography," Kepes outlines his utopian goal for a modern visual language: **26** "The plastic structures must expand to absorb, without giving up their plastic strength, the meaningful images of current concrete social experiences. The task of the contemporary artist is to release and bring into social action the dynamic forces of visual imagery." That is, in the same way that art could help its spectator to reassert visual order upon the American scene (as discussed above in relation to Precisionism), it must also engage the spectator's interior process of meaning-making in a more dynamic, associative way. It must retrain the spectator's vision so that it can be brought into line with changing systems of knowledge and perception in modernity. As if in response to this call for a "dynamic iconography," Schwartz and Hubley assert the primacy of what they call "the *dynamic* graphic symbol," arguing, **27** "In short, while the film records what we *see*, the drawing can record also what we *know*," thereby aligning themselves with Kepes's mission of using art to reconcile vision with the conceptual shifts that modernity had wrought. Kepes's goal of mass meaning-making through a dynamic, symbolic iconography found purchase in the newly revitalized medium of the training cartoon.

However, UPA's quest for a mature, streamlined, uniquely communicative cartoon did not subside along with the need for wartime training films, or even for sponsored informational films in general. As political opinion shifted in the transition to the Cold War and UPA's left-leaning reputation began to deprive them of government and industrial contracts, Hubley and his colleagues brought their new visual language into the theatrical market, focusing their modernist, goal-oriented sensibility on the wider American public. Yet if their attention shifted toward entertainment, their experiments in vision and communication nevertheless continued.

In his 1953 article "Two Premieres: Disney and UPA," David Fisher acknowledges the



centrality of perception in UPA's approach to animation, observing, **28** "Most UPA films reveal a preoccupation with visual reality unusual in any cartoon." Yet as hand-drawn, consciously composed artifacts, nearly all cartoons are preoccupied with visual reality; it is merely their stance toward it that differs. Disney is preoccupied with preserving traditional notions of visual reality, while UPA is preoccupied with making sense of the new, modern notions of it that were asserting themselves over the course of the twentieth century and, if Kepes is to be believed, were coming to a head in the middle decades. Fisher espouses a curious contradiction: first, speaking of *Gerald McBoing Boing*, he notes, **29** "[H]e exists in a never-never land of flat-colored backgrounds and outline people." Then, in the same paragraph, he argues, **30** "[UPA] rejects the traditional never-never land of the film cartoon in favor of human reality, even though its style is less realistic on the surface." How might we reconcile the competing ideas that UPA fashions never-never lands even as it rejects them in favor of human reality? At the heart of Fisher's paradox, and of Schwartz and Hubley's manifestos and of various interviews with UPA staffers and modernist cartoonists from other postwar studios, is the conviction that the superficially "less realistic" visual style of the modern cartoon enables a clearer view of modern life, a conviction that makes little sense unless it is considered in the context of the assorted developments in American modernism leading up to mid-century. These developments grew out of the belief that old models of vision were inefficient and inaccurate, and that a new vision must be cultivated if humankind is to properly see the world in which it found itself within the chaos of modernity.

Still on modernists' minds in the middle of the twentieth century are the familiar problems of order and vision, a project that, as I have argued above, **31** the Precisionists took on in the 1920s. And as with the Precisionists, attempts to reinscribe visual order on the postwar American scene rested on an appeal to geometry—and not just within the insular space of the art gallery. Identifying the grid as **32** "the theme of consumer life in the early fifties," animation historian Norman M. Klein notes that **33** the proliferation of "squares within squares," in shopping malls, in streets and freeways, in television, and in home decor, "suggested a conquest of chaos. Very early on, one saw the consumer prairies emerging, outlined by geometric space."

Discussing the modernism of the cartoon form, Klein argues, **34** "Cartoons constantly adjust to media, perception, and marketing. They are constantly 'redrawn' by the crises of modernity." Esther Leslie concurs, emphasizing the serious work cartoons perform for the sake of vision and space: **35** "Cartooning was the place where research into flatness and illusion and abstraction was most conscientiously carried out." This curious term, "research," recurs often in the writings of modernist art and design theorists, particularly in the circle of European emigres who came to America during and after World War II—including, of course, Kepes. It positions the artist's canvas—or the cartoonist's cel—as a laboratory, a place where art seeks solutions to scientific problems. In the postwar context, it implicates the arts in the explosion of better-living-through-science rhetoric as wartime technological developments were redirected toward the consumer market.

Yet the cartoonist's research into visual representation carried a cultural component as well, one that should be familiar to the student of Precisionism; Paul Wells calls post-Disney animation **36** "a response to and a development of a variety of 'modernities' and a consistent commentary upon America as a machine culture." This commentary, couched within the wartime rhetoric of training, education, and mass communication, was aimed at facilitating the adjustment to modernity and its accompanying forces on a mass scale, particularly after the war, when, as in other technologies, developments in animation were redirected toward the broader American public rather than solely at soldiers or trainees. Film producer and Army officer Leonard Spigelgass speaks tellingly of the use of cartoons as what he calls "therapy through films," an enlistment of animation in the service of calming fears and easing anxiety. While he is referring specifically to fear engendered by wartime misinformation, his colleagues in the animation field perhaps saw other applications for cartoon therapy, easing anxiety caused not by rumors and falsehoods, but by disordered vision.

Wells speaks at length of the visual work carried out by UPA cartoons, noting, **37** "The UPA studios were instrumental in recovering animation from the structures and limitations that

sought to define it, returning the form to the proper embrace of *perceived reality* and its place within artistic and cultural contexts." UPA style, he argues, **38** "required the fresh-sightedness of artists versed not merely in progressing art traditions, but in artists who would embrace a philosophical approach to perception, and to the possibilities of synaesthetic cinema, and ways of 'post-styling' the reality of both the real world and the Disneyesque orthodoxy." This "post-styling of the real world" is, perhaps, a central feature of modernism writ large; what needs elaboration is the ways in which UPA's "post-styling" is consonant with that of the earlier generation of American modernists, the Precisionists.

UPA cartoons have never, to my knowledge, been called "Precisionist"; what they have been called, however, is "Cubist." Yet these films are not quite Cubist, according to my understanding of Cubism as the condensation of multiple perspectives into a single image and the segmentation, analysis, and reassembly of space according to a theoretical model in the quest for a fuller view of the object. What they are is "cubistic," in Friedman's sense of **39** "ready-made 'cubistic' forms--skyscrapers, bridges, docks, grain elevators, turbines, cranes"—that is, UPA cartoons engage with geometry, and they utilize shapes and forms that resemble the results of Cubist process, but they take a different route to get there. They look nothing like, for instance, *Ballet Mécanique*, Fernand Leger's famous 1924 attempt to construct a Cubist cinema in the form of rapid montage and the establishment of pure, abstract visual rhythm. If that can be called cinematic Cubism, UPA engages with Cubism in a very different way, situating itself in a lineage stemming from Precisionist appropriations of the form. Mid-century modernity, as Kepes argues, called for an artistic response to a salient perceptual question, and UPA answered by picking up Precisionism's torch, echoing its practice of joining abstraction and representation in the service of establishing a kind of visual order.

This shared concern, subtending the similarities of form between Precisionism and UPA style, is their foundational link: **40** the yoking of abstraction to representation. It is also the vital difference that challenges the common practice of situating UPA animation within the context of Abstract Expressionism. UPA's modernism is different from that of Abstract Expressionism's nonrepresentational depiction of inner states; it is a variation on the modernism of Precisionism, the meticulous and ordered engagement with vision and the outer world. The similarities—and differences—of form between the two reveal the ways in which cartoons updated Precisionist modernism for a mid-century application.

Perhaps UPA cartoons' most defining characteristic is **41** their supposed flatness. Leslie notes that they "emphasized the two-dimensional plane," Klein remarks upon their "flat graphics," and Amid Amidi, defending UPA from this charge, reveals just how central flatness is to common assumptions about the studio's style. Composed of simple planes of bold, unmodulated color, the worlds depicted in UPA animation eschew the rounded, three-dimensional approach of Disney illusionism. Yet to call this space "flat" is a misrepresentation; it would be more accurate to say that UPA's artists constructed new models of spatial representation through the use of flat shapes. **42** Precisionism, for its part, is not often discussed in terms of a perceived flatness of the picture plane; rather, commentators tend to discuss it in terms of the creation of space and depth. This depth, however, is frequently suggested through the strategic positioning of Stavitsky's "hard-edged, static, smoothly-brushed, simplified forms rendered in unmodulated colors," that is, flat shapes. **43** Yet Precisionism as a whole shows a range of approaches to space: Louis Lozowick's American city series, for instance, layers planes of abstract geometry directly on top of each other without suggesting the space in between; Charles Sheeler's *Church Street El*, on the other hand, employs a forced overhead perspective to suggest extreme depth through the same abstract geometry. **44** UPA's continuum is likewise extensive, spanning both *Punchy de Leon*'s closely layered abstraction and the Mr. Magoo series's more three-dimensional, vanishing point-oriented perspective.

UPA was in fact overwhelmingly concerned with the creation of deep space, and believed that this supposedly flat aesthetic was the way to create it; **45** animation designer Bill Hurtz, speaking of *Gerald McBoing Boing*'s design, notes, "We decided to dispense with all walls and floors and ground levels and skies and horizon lines...If you put a doorway in a room with no boundaries, way, way back, that's a vast hall, far more vast than if you added the walls and the ceiling; there's nothing to contain the space." The quality, I suspect, that leads to the designation of flatness as a hallmark of UPA style is actually a different aesthetic marker that these cartoons

also share with Precisionism: the unification of background and foreground design. This too is a significant departure from Disney style. Barrier observes, **46** "In the Disney cartoons, and in American Hollywood cartoons of the thirties, the characters—composed of lines and flat, bright colors, typically stood out from the background paintings like actors performing in front of stage sets. The backgrounds were realistically modeled and painted in muted colors, and so the characters 'read' against them as color accents." **47** Modern cartoons, however, designed their backgrounds according to the same principles that dictated their character designs, creating foreground figures that were, as Howard Rieder describes them, "part of the overall design of the frame." **48** Precisionists worked in a similar mode, evacuating both foreground architecture and background environment of extraneous detail, often reducing both skyscraper and sky to equally flat color planes. The clear, "highly restrained surfaces of the Precisionist canvas" received much attention from those attempting to define the style, positioning Precisionism as an early proponent of this kind of painting governed by a unified design, a concern that UPA carried on in its cartoons.

The unified foreground and background of the UPA cartoon, combined with the reduced, abstract nature of that unified design, evokes another bridge between mid-century cartoons and Precisionist painting. **49** Klein characterizes UPA animation as consisting of "blocks of color that suggest a great stillness," and Barrier describes UPA animator Bobe Cannon's approach as "a yearning for stillness and order." As with the matter of outer-directed vision, this stillness sets postwar animation apart from its Abstract Expressionist moment, and its retreat into stasis while action painting became one of the standard bearers of mid-century modernism links it again with that other modernism, Precisionism. Indeed, much of the discourse surrounding Precisionism latches onto its stillness as a means of understanding its unique mode of representation.

This feeling of stasis in mid-century animation is of course partially attributable to its actual, budget-directed stillness, that is, the literal reduction of movement within the frame of limited animation; however, there is more at work here, an element of conscious aesthetic choice that suggests great stillness through visual design itself. The evacuation of extraneous detail and the reduction to essential forms, the aesthetic credo running through Precisionism and Kepes and into UPA animation, conveys a stance toward modernity that all three figures shared, and that directly facilitates the establishment of visual order. Simply put, the task of artistic representation was to give the eye less to do at the moment of perception so that the mind could carry out its work of meaning-making, enabling a fuller, more sophisticated dynamism built on the backs of modernism's simplified constituent elements. This metaphorical "evacuation" of detail creates the actual feeling of a vacuum running through this particular line of modernism, from **50** Barbara Rose's identification of Sheeler's "structures [that] are further simplified to a few straight lines and rectangles set squarely and directly in the middle ground, coolly floating in an anonymous setting" to **51** Klein's description of *Gerald McBoing Boing* as "a world that seems floating in a void." This still void, this designed emptiness, rests at the heart of the search for visual order in a modernity that provides too much perceptual detail in too much motion, and it functions as a governing aesthetic that Precisionism and modernist animation share.

Yet for all their similarities, UPA style differs from Precisionism in important ways. Most noticeable is the playfulness with which UPA approaches its art. While I would argue—and I do in a longer version of this chapter—that Precisionism is not as cold and humorless as its commentators suggest, it is also nowhere near as rambunctious as its animated successors. **52**

Precisionism's straight lines and perpendicular angles look positively rigid next to the wrenched perspectives and skewed geometries of Mr. Magoo's world—and the Mr. Magoo series is perhaps the most realistic and representational of UPA's output, what Rieder describes as "about a halfway point between the extreme literalism of Disney and the stylized animation of the more offbeat UPA films." **53** Francis Criss's work perhaps marks one of Precisionism's closest passages to UPA's crooked cartoon space; however, as a whole, UPA strikes a different position on modernity, perhaps bemused and affectionately mocking where Precisionism's is disciplined and constructive. Fisher hints at the novelty of UPA's critique, positioning its brand of cartoon as mischievous cultural criticism: **54** "For them visual eccentricity reflects the oddities of life.

They appeal to that something inside us whose reaction to politics, for instance, manifests itself in a desire to paint mustachios on public statues." This shift from cautious optimism and tentative critique to gleeful irreverence recalls Stavitsky's assessment of Precisionism's decline,



according to which **55** "[t]he end of Precisionism can be linked to the devastations of World War II, which effectively destroyed the machine-age beliefs in industry as a beneficent force." In its quest for a more efficiently communicative, modern cartoon, UPA unhitched Precisionism's form from its rationalism, carrying out its project of establishing visual order, but doing so in a post-World War II world that could no longer make such relatively unproblematic use of the specific kind of order proposed by the industrial logic of interwar America. **56** In fact, as Precisionism ceded the mantle of modernism to Abstract Expressionism in the late 1940s, the postwar output of Precisionist painters veered ever closer to a cartoon aesthetic, indicating that this reevaluation of Precisionism took place not only within the field of animation, but within its original context of the art gallery as well.

In retrofitting Precisionism to a less naive postwar culture—or, to be more generous, a postwar culture that had seen Precisionism's hints of critical darkness borne out in political and technological reality—UPA redirected its aesthetic of geometrical efficiency to different ends.

When Precisionism's sharp lines, simple geometric forms, and unmodulated colors made the jump from painting to animation in the mid-1940s, their relationship to the visible, outer world changed. **57** Precisionism looked the way it looked because it pictured precise objects—machinery, architecture, industrial materials. **58** Modern animation, however, applied this aesthetic across the board, not only to modern architectural environments, as would be expected, but also to organic objects, most notably the human form, with which Precisionism dealt by simple exclusion. Essentially, UPA style answered the question that Precisionism left hanging: what happens to people in a rationalized, industrially efficient world? Narratively, they become avatars of neurotic modernity: Gerald McBoing Boing cannot communicate without technological mediation, the elderly Mr. Magoo disastrously relies on a premodern understanding of a modern world his failing eyesight cannot assimilate, and the protagonist of *The Unicorn in the Garden* is threatened with Freudian psychoanalysis because of his overactive imagination. But more importantly, they reveal the effects of this modern neurosis in their very visual form—human figures living in a Precisionist universe, turned Precisionist themselves, but wrenched out of shape by the upheaval of technological change. Where Stefan Hirsch and George Ault subtly intimated the disturbing implications of industrial modernity in brooding, dark tones and eerie, desolate urban landscapes, John Hubley and his cohort found themselves in a world where Hirsch and Ault's suspicions came true, and, as their cartoons made perfectly clear, the only thing to do was laugh.

In developing its groundbreaking cartoon style, UPA had access to an earlier, homegrown modernism that, in the 1920s, had been where the animators were in the 1940s, attempting to craft a simplified form of abstracted representation to establish a sense of order in tumultuous times. At the intersection of these three presences on the art scene—Precisionism, Kepes, and UPA—is an ethos of efficiency, in representation and communication. For all three, a mixture of reductive abstraction and selective representation offer an efficient way to direct the perception of the external world and to make sense of its chaos. This mediation of the outer world, clearing away extraneous detail and leaving the spectator with the most basic constituent elements of the observable world, facilitated an order that the Precisionists, Kepes, and the UPA animators believed that the human mind craved but that the eye, unaided, could not provide. This concern, as vital in the industrial America of the 1920s as in the postwar America of the 1940s and 1950s, unites these two modernist moments, revealing the continuity between these two periods in American history and the durability of this central question of modernism, the question of visual order.

